Reviewer's report

Title: Family physicians information seeking behaviors: A survey comparison with other specialties

Version: 1 Date: 4 November 2004

Reviewer: Johanna I Westbrook

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General
In summary this is a very interesting paper which could add to our relatively poor understanding of family physicians use of electronic information sources in routine practice. However the methods and results sections need to provide sufficient detail for readers to clearly understand how the study was undertaken and the content of the survey, along with a full description of the results relating to the 17 questionnaire items. At present the discussion does not appear to be supported by the results presented. A full description of the methods and results will be of great value to future researchers who seek to replicate the study and compare their findings.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Methods
The method section requires considerably more detail regarding:
How the survey questions were developed
A summary or list of the survey items
A description of the multiple choice response options
Were all questions structured in the same way with the same response categories?

The focus of the paper is family physicians, yet they made up only around 20% of the sample of respondents. Does this reflect their proportion in the US physician population? As the main comparison group is other physicians who made up the remaining 80% of the respondents more information about their age and gender mix would be of value. Do the researchers have any demographic information about the non-respondents to the survey?

Results
A table of all 17 items and the responses for the FP and other physicians would be of value in understanding the study findings and of value to future researchers who may wish to compare their findings.

The results section appears to indicate that respondents rated some questionnaire items in contrast to statements in the methods section which indicated that the questions were multiple-choice items. The confusion may lie in the use of the term ‘multiple-choice’. Clarification of the specific response categories in the methods section will help considerably in the interpretation of the findings.

In addition to the percentages the total number of respondents to the questions should be included, including in the tables. The Chi square values including degrees of freedom should be added to the p values reported.

Discussion
Due to the poor description of the data collection tool and to the specific items included in the survey it is very difficult to evaluate statements made in the discussion.
For example,

Page 7 paragraph 2 The paragraph commences with the statement “Family physicians search for specific material that will benefit a patient or group of patients, often just-in-time at the point of care via handheld computers”. The results as presented provide no findings related to where clinicians searched for information, ie at the point of care during a consultation or at some other time. Did the researchers include a specific question about this?

Page 8 paragraph 2, line 4 “These obstacles appear to be greater for family physicians in their quest for patient-specific information. Specialists find less difficulty in their primary information targets of …” Did the researchers analyse barriers by ratings of difficulty they presented to the clinicians?

Page 9 paragraph 2, line 6 “Compared to specialists, family physicians direct more attention to patient care questions at the point of care.” The results do not seem to address this issue, yet there is no reference to support this statement.

Page 9 paragraph 3 line 8 “…family physicians can be overwhelmed by the amount of clinical information, their inadequate searching skills and their lack of confidence that they will be able to answer a question.” Was confidence in answering a question included in the survey or is this a reference to Gorman’s study?

Page 10, paragraph 1 line 10 “The increased use of handheld computers appears to have penetrated the point of care clinical encounter…” It is not clear how the current study allows this conclusion to be made.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Abstract
Results – “Hand held computers were used by almost half of family physicians [to…??]” It would be informative to provide some indication of the reasons physicians used the handheld computers in relation to information seeking.

Page 2 Background, paragraph 1, line 7 Remove ‘the’ ie “Pursuing answers to questions..” Line 9 and 10 Conflicting use of present and past tense.

Paragraph 2, line 3 it may be unclear to readers that the authors are referring to the work of Ely here. I suggest adding “family physicians [were found by Ely ref No. to ] spend an average of ……”

Page 3, paragraph 1, line 1 Reword “.. improve the quality of care provided by family physicians by …”

Page 3, paragraph 1 line 3, It is not clear to me how reference 6 and possibly 5 supports the preceding statement.

Methods
Page 4, paragraph 2 The statement regarding the power statement needs some further elaboration. “A power calculation determined that a sample of 2200 was needed to generalize to the total population of US physicians.” The authors need to state what information generated from the survey they hoped to generalize to the population. For example were the sample size calculations based upon estimates of prevalence of internet use?
Page 4 paragraph 2 last line replace the work generalizability with representativeness.

Page 4 paragraph 3 How was the sample stratified and randomized?
Page 5 paragraph 2, last line Chi square analysis not correlations.

Results
Page 5 In reporting the number of completed surveys, the number of fax surveys distributed in order to obtain these 2200 completed surveys should also be reported.

Page 6 paragraph 2 line 1 more detail required. “..family physicians rated journal first [in terms of what? most frequently used? Useful? Etc], followed by local and national CME ....”

Line 3 “However [remove from a separate item] the majority ..”

Page 7 paragraph 1 line 3 “… physicians reporting [remove their] use, most frequently ..” Line 3 “Table 3 summarizes [ reasons for use] of handheld computers.”

Discussion
Page 7 paragraph 1 line 7 “..specific patients rather than [specifically] looking for new research findings.”

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.